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THE REVIVAL OF DECORATIVE LEATHER.

BY MISS E. T. LANDER.

It is said that important improvements have been made recently in the methods devised to render decorated leather durable in its art character. Should the new processes prove in any extended test to give the results expected, their discovery will prove a valuable purpose in the case of any good work of the kind. For, as has been noted repeatedly, as fine in any instance as may have been the skill of the artist in introducing his colors with this material, time has been sure to deal with the production to infinitely greater advantage. The rich, completed beauty of leather hangings found on old castle walls is confessedly owing to no less constant and powerful a decorative colleague. Frequently, in works of this character, original artistic conception must have fallen short of pre-discernment of the finely perfected color harmony dependent on chemical changes in animal oils, and of calculating the pace of the general structural decay through which only this ultimate quality of beauty was to be developed.

Unfortunately some of the finest specimens of artistic leather of former periods have become easily subject to defacement. In these cases the dried-out material has been rendered hard, and with a readiness to break in bending. The superimposed coloring matter also yields to these fractures and falls away until white spots of silver background make their appearance, or, in technical statement, the work "silvers up." On this account it has been a study of some importance of late, as probably it has been in all times, to discover the best means of avoiding a tendency to the destruction of this form of decoration, when it becomes most desirable that it should be preserved. It is now claimed as a result of these efforts that a material has been produced which possesses, in a high degree, the desired quality of unchangeable flexibility. So little, however, is known regarding this art in its chemical process, that the inventor can hardly be ready to prove that the new differs essentially from the old. It is narrated in Exodus that the rams' skins for covering the tent of the Tabernacle were dyed red, being also arranged with badgers' skins above; and although the method of the Israelites with decorative leather is nowhere explicitly set forth, it is considered quite evident that the art of restoring the supple qualities of skins, and rendering them durable, was well understood in the earliest ages. Many of the processes of working leather which were practiced by the Egyptians have been noted in the paintings and sculptures of Thebes as being similar to those of the present day. A few interesting examples of the work itself are here preserved in the Abbott collection, being chiefly in the form of shoes and sandals in white and red and in purple leather stamped with gold. It is elsewhere noted that for covering harps, shields, etc., the leather used by this artistic people was embossed and colored. That they used acacia pods for tanning appears, however, to be nearly all that has been learned of their chemical processes with skins. It was discovered by early historians that the Saracens relied largely on the use of alum, but the methods of the Romans were wholly lost, as for the greater part have been those of the middle ages. Apparently a degree of secrecy at all times attended the preparation and adornment of leather, with continuance of that reticence to the present day. The exact manner, for instance, of using birch bark tar in the processes with the much admired Russia leather is said to be still held a profound secret among the principal Russian manufacturers. Other classes of leather workers also have invented processes known and used only by themselves. It appears, moreover, that with the manufacture completed, there continue among different decorators certain peculiar and undivulged methods connected with the application of this covering to walls and ceilings. Most usually in any hands the material is applied directly to the surface to be covered. In case, however, of valuable artistic work, the hangings are enclosed in panels to allow of removal; and when fine mediæval pieces are used, as happens in a few American houses, these may have become so brittle as to need also to be first mounted on muslin. An old Moorish panel, for example, largely worn to the silver in many places, and marked with holes, is worth all preserving care in its harmony of colors and the beautiful and gracefully united forms of its design.

The success of the revival of this style as here noted, is largely owing to the efforts of Mr. C. R. Yandell, who, in the reproduction of an old style, has invested the same with a considerable amount of original artistic nature.

New ideas of dyeing are of special consequence as having led to endless variety, with indescribable beauty of coloring. These final, most perfected tints are the careful study of the artist named, under whose direction they are developed in the material, after it is received from the dyer in its fundamental stage of color. The kind intended for use as dyed leather, in distinction from the illuminated variety, is then double-dyed according to some unpublished formula of the decorator. A frequently important result of this secondary process may be a uniformity of tint throughout where were previously varied tones in different parts of the skin. As a better aid to the effect of some designs, however, a clouded background may be preferred. As sometimes the result of scientific treatment, sometimes of chance, may be given clear body tones, and in other cases mottled effects. Experiment is incessantly creating something new in this material, with fresh, indefinable distinctions in antique blues and reds, and old dimmed colors generally. Mahogany

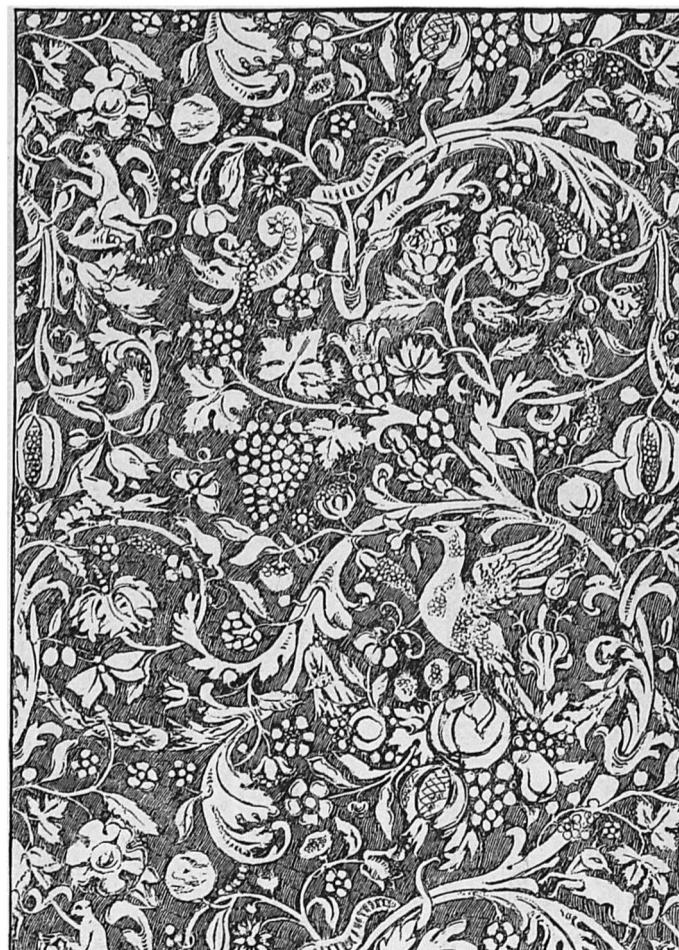
color, red, brown and olive are included in the most popular list.

The use of no decorative material has increased more rapidly than that of leather, whether of the comparatively inexpensive stamped varieties, the illuminated sorts, or those incised to resemble old Spanish leather, being partly carved and partly burned with caustic and hot irons. In Mr. Yandell's establishment may also be seen together some of



CHAIR BACK OF OLD CORDOVA LEATHER.

the fifteenth century work of the latter kind, and its almost exact reproduction turned out in 1883. In one instance an old chair secured at great cost has served as a model for highly successful imitations, in which the mediæval design of a falcon perched on a woman's hand has been so executed that the new embossed and incised work might be almost indistinguishable from the old, except for the mellowess



REPRODUCTION FROM OLD ITALIAN LEATHER.

JEFFREYS & CO., LONDON.

imparted to the latter by age. Some of our leather workers preserve also fine examples of Spanish and Flemish painted leather hangings of the middle ages, of which copies are impossible. A few paintings of this kind in the possession

of Mr. Yandell are of the highest interest as specimens of seventeenth century production. Two of the four pictures had been converted into folding screens before being purchased by their present owner, and the others are exhibited as wall hangings. One of the latter represents the subject of Cleopatra dissolving the pearl at the banquet given to Antony, and on one of the screens appears the Queen of Sheba offering gifts to Solomon. The figures in each of the paintings are life-size, with costumes elaborately decorated by means of tooling. These pictures, which are well preserved, are valued at \$10,000. It has been said that no works of the kind, having equal interest with these, have ever before reached this country. Paintings of this style are rare, even where, as in England, may be found large collections of the stamped, painted and gilt leather of early times. It is recorded that the ghademeiles, as these hangings were called, were extensively used in Spain, and that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were imitated largely in France and other countries. The name of the product, derived from the village of Ghadames in Africa, from which the Moors imported this great industry into Spain, appears to have been less universally preserved in commerce than in literature. Modern taste may be unfitted to conceive the fine sight we are told it was at Cordova, to see the walls covered with great variety of form and color in these ghademeiles or hides hung out to dry after being painted and gilded. Fancy is more naturally fed with accounts of rich hangings of tapestries, or of leather inlaid with precious stones, of the kind used for decorating the Chateau d'Anet, when Diane de Poitiers herself supplied the designs for every room. A quality, however, which fairly suffices now with us is that known as a "leathery expression," by which is supposed to be meant the look belonging to hand-made leather, with its free representation of the design.

In the recent style, which fairly approaches that of the most admirable early production, the advance seems hardly to have been more marked with stamped leathers in their great degree of perfection, than in those of the illuminated variety. The multitudinous modern fancy is here fully in exercise, which seeks in art the innumerable, continually changeable effects of nature; and swept in with conventional designs wrought in bronze hues, with green, and red and gold, may be suggestions of color and light beyond description. Sometimes the background, which in this work has invariably a basis of pure metal, shows changeable red and gold, overlaid with rich groupings of cherubic figures, flowers, fruits, mythological animal forms, butterflies and slender-winged beetles. A dining-room may be furnished with a hanging showing a dull silver ground, stamped in small grooved diamonds, over which is figured a bold pattern of branching pomegranates, strawberries and flitting butterflies. For a Vanderbilt dining-room may be seen in preparation a wall covering of a dull, old, metallic color with conventionalized sunflowers and pineapples. As a quiet fancy of decoration, the simple rose and carnation design, although not novel, is always satisfactory; an approved example of the kind is shown in the hangings of the memorial library of Quincy. With richer styles the Renaissance ideas of design are becoming popular, and following which the elaborate effects are frequently enhanced by means of a closely-seeded background. Sometimes this style of imitation is pure, although more often quite otherwise, and in some instances designers in leather have allowed the general motive of the Renaissance to be disturbed by the presence of a butterfly, or something else as ungenuine.

In leather panels introduced into different forms of furniture, the material is sometimes tooled and painted in a manner producing an effect of Haviland faience. It is softer, however, in expression, and takes on the changes of time harmoniously with the article. A pleasing instance of this use is in a table with a series of panels extended around the sides in which are represented various scenes with hound and deer. Again, it may appear in a mirror frame with singing birds and cupids listening. The decoration is also applied with good effect to the coved mantel-top, where in one example is shown a landscape with an old castle, and with water reflecting the forms of trees in the foreground. In some houses the pictorial decoration is made to distinguish the frieze, but less frequently here perhaps than in Boston. For easel pictures a gold background on leather is utilized with highly decorative effect to produce a golden atmosphere, as of autumn.

With new devices the numerous imitations of decorated leather are showing a varied increase in admirable quality. Those of the fairest appearance coming from the French establishment are formed by an intermixture of leather pulp with the paper material. These unite a finished elegance with durability as great as would be desired for any hanging except in the case of really high art-work. All the effects of the more costly material are shown in some of the paper, which has a semblance of hammered metals or with varied tones of nature. In that of our own manufacture, however, which copies antique and all other designs, there may still be found sufficient chance for improvement. A portion of that used here is a fabrication of the Japanese, which is of light texture, imitative of morocco leather, with frequently double width of forty inches, and of satisfactory decorative quality when figured with native designs. Some of that, however, recently arriving from Yokohama presents the Japanese idea of the Renaissance, and which, it need hardly be said, is wanting in the essential sense of freedom belonging to the style. Oxydized and bronze effects are frequently a feature of halls and assembly rooms. One of the most successful recent imitations of hammered gold is seen in the Government buildings at Albany.